

Remarks on Border Security and Enforcement and an Exchange With Reporters
January 5, 2023

The President. Hi, everybody. Sorry to keep you waiting. There's a lot going on.

Today I'd like to—the Vice President and I would like to talk you about how my administration is dealing with our situation in the southwest border. Now, these actions alone that I'm going to announce today aren't going to fix our entire immigration system, but they can help us a good deal in better managing what is a difficult challenge.

On my first day in office, some of you may recall, who cover this area—and they cover it well—I sent Congress a comprehensive piece of legislation that would completely overhaul what has been a broken immigration system for a long time: cracking down on illegal immigration; strengthening legal immigration; and protecting "Dreamers," those with temporary protected status, and farmworkers, who all are part of the fabric of our Nation.

But congressional Republicans have refused to consider my comprehensive plan. And they rejected my recent request for an additional \$3.5 billion to secure the border and funds for 2,000 new asylum personnel, another—asylum officers and personnel—and a hundred new immigration judges so people don't have to wait years to get their claims adjudicated, which they have a right to make a claim legally.

And the failure to pass and fund this comprehensive plan has increased the challenges that we're seeing at our southwest border. No one knows this better than the Vice President.

And to truly understand what's happening there, it's important to step back and see our—see the bigger picture here. You know, I know it's hard to see, but because our politics has been so divisive—you know it's getting much better, as you've all observed, but it's been so darn divisive that it clouds the picture. I mean, it clouds the picture.

But let me explain what I'm going to do in—as clearly and plainly as I can. I know it's a complicated issue. I don't want to pretend there's anything easy about it.

People come to America for a whole lot of different reasons. To seek new opportunity in what is the strongest economy in the world. Can't blame them wanting to do it. They flee oppression, you know, to the freest nation in the world. They chase their own American Dream in the greatest nation in the world. And the story of America is the story of so many of your families, including mine, going back to the mid-1800s from Ireland.

Now, there are a number of ways to immigrate to America legally under our existing laws. For example, an American citizen—an American citizen can sponsor an immediate family member from another country. An American company can sponsor an employee from another country. There are visas for students to study in our colleges and other special categories.

And regardless of the legal pathway, they process them to require everyone be involved in following the law. That's the notion. There are laws to get here legally. That includes another legal way for someone to come to America by seeking asylum because they're fleeing persecution, like a lot of our ancestors did as well.

And for many people, that's what's happening at our southwest border now.

Over the past several years, thousands of people have been fleeing from Central and South America and the Caribbean countries ruled by oppressive dictators—including Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela—and escaping gang violence, which has the same impact, in Haiti. Currently, these

four countries account for most of the people traveling into Mexico to start a new life by getting at the—to the American border and trying to cross.

But instead of safe and orderly process at the border, we have a patchwork system that simply doesn't work as it should. We don't have enough asylum officers or personnel to determine whether people qualify for asylum. There's a standard by what you have to meet. You don't—we don't have enough immigrant judges—immigration judges to adjudicate the claims of immigrants.

In fact, the previous administration used a rule called title 42 to deal with the pandemic, a rapidly—to rapidly expel people who crossed the border. It was a—designed to deal with the pandemic, but it's used as a means to expel people at the border.

People turned away under title 42, and there are not—and they're not barred from trying to come back. They've been turned away. They go back. They try again. They try again. Well, you know, they can and they do try to reenter the United States again and again, which makes the problem that borders—at the border even worse.

And under the United States Supreme Court decision, a case on title 42 later this year, my administration will—and they will make a decision, finally, what to do about title 42. In the meantime, my administration will continue to use that authority as the Supreme Court has required.

And until Congress passes the funds—a comprehensive immigration plan to fix the system completely—my administration is going to work to make things better at the border using the tools that we have available to us now.

Today my administration is taking several steps to stiffen enforcement for those who try to come without a legal right to stay, and to put in place a faster process—I emphasize a "faster process"—to decide a claim of asylum. Someone says, "I'm coming because I'm escaping oppression." Well, there's got to be a way to determine that much quicker for people who are credibly seeking protection from persecution.

Secretary of Homeland Security Mayorkas will detail these actions very shortly, after I finish, at Homeland Security.

But here's one significant step we're taking: Over the summer, we saw a huge spike in the number of Venezuelans traveling through Mexico and attempting to enter the United States without going through our legal processes. They—we responded by using and ensuring that there are two safe and lawful ways for someone leaving the country to come to America.

[At this point, the President briefly addressed Vice President Kamala D. Harris, who stood behind him, as follows.]

And that was one of the reasons you were proposing.

First, if they're seeking asylum, they can use an app on their cell phone called CBP One—o-n-e; CBP One—o-n-e. That's to spell it out, not the number "1." To schedule an appointment at a port of entry and make their asylum claim there without crossing the border unlawfully and have a decision determined by an asylum officer: Do they qualify?

Second, in October, we worked with the Mexican Government to launch a new parole program. There's another program called the—you all know it, but the public may not—called the "parole program" that immediately showed results by reducing the number of people crossing the border unlawfully. The way this parole program works: One must have a lawful sponsor here in the United States who agrees to sponsor you to get here; then, that person has to go—undergo rigorous background checks and apply from outside the United States and not cross the border illegally in the meantime.

If they apply and their application is approved, they can use the same app, the CBP One app, to present at a port of entry and be able to work in the United States legally for 2 years. That's the process.

But if their application is denied or if they attempt to cross into the United States unlawfully, they will be returned back to Mexico and will not be eligible for this program after that.

So they—if they—we're making the program available. If they apply and they do it properly, fine. If they don't apply and they try to come through, they're not going to have an opportunity to deal with the program.

This new process is orderly, it's safe, and it's humane. And it works. Since we created the new program, the number of Venezuelans trying to enter America without going through a legal process has dropped dramatically, from about 1,100 per day to less than 250 per day on average. That's several hundred people on average every single day who are not crossing into America illegally.

Today I'm announcing that my administration is going to expand the parole program for people not only from Venezuela, but from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Haiti. Again, these four countries—Venezuela, Cuba and—Cuba and Nicaragua and Haiti—these four countries account for most of the people now traveling into Mexico to try to start a new life by crossing the border into the United States of America on the southwest border.

We anticipate this action is going to substantially reduce the number of people attempting—attempting to cross our southwest border without going through a legal process. In fact, today I'm announcing that Mexico has agreed to allow up—to return up to 30,000 persons per month who try, get caught, and get sent back from those four countries who are apprehended while attempting to unlawfully cross the border—the southwest border.

My message is this: If you're trying to leave Cuba, Nicaragua, or Haiti, you have—and we—or have agreed to begin a journey to America, do not—do not just show up at the border. Stay where you are and apply legally from there.

Starting today, if you don't apply through the legal process, you will not be eligible for this new parole program. Let me reiterate: You need a lawful sponsor in the United States of America, number one; and you need to undergo a rigorous background check, number two.

If your application is approved and you show up at a U.S. airport or when and where directed——

[The President coughed.]

Excuse me—you have access. But if your application is denied or you attempt to cross into the United States unlawfully, you will not be allowed to enter.

Look, we should all recognize that as long as America is the land of freedom and opportunity, people are going to try to come here. And that's what many of our ancestors did, and it's no surprise that it's happening again today.

We can't stop people from making the journey, but we can require them to come here, and they—that they come here in an orderly way under U.S. law.

And let me say it again: The actions we're announcing today will make things better—will make things better—but will not fix the border problem completely. There's more that has to be done, and I laid that out in the first week I was here.

That work will not be done unless and until the Congress enacts and funds a more comprehensive immigration plan that I proposed on day one. Until Congress has acted, I can act where I have legal capacity to do so.

Last year, I brought together 20 leaders—many of you were there—from the Western Hemisphere—heads of state—to stabilize the flow of immigration, to expand pathways to immigration, and to manage border—and to manage the border humanely.

The leaders of the hemisphere have built on those efforts that I led when I was Vice President to expand economic assistance to nations in North Central America so people here can—there—there can improve their economic prospects at home, instead of having to leave for the United States.

Most people would much rather stay in the country they are if they can feed their families, be safe, send their kids to school, and have opportunity.

It's not like people—you've heard me say it before: It's not like people are sitting around a table in—somewhere in Central America and saying: "I've got a great idea. Let's sell everything we have. Let's give it to a coyote, a smuggler. They'll take us on a harrowing journey for thousands of miles to get to the United States, then we're going to illegally cross the border. They're going to drop us in a desert. And we're—in a place where we don't speak the language. Won't that be fun?" I'm not being facetious.

Well, President [Vice President; White House correction] Harris led this effort—led this effort to make things better in the countries from which they are leaving. And thanks to her leadership, she's been able to generate more than \$3.2 billion from the private sector to create jobs and opportunities in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to help people stay in their own countries—home countries where it'll be safer and they have some opportunities.

We've also set up a—joint patrols and law enforcement with Mexico and Guatemala that share real-time information on locations that smugglers are using to convince migrant groups to cross illegally.

That's what they're doing. This is—they're—out recruiting—recruiting. They're taking all the savings or anything they have to take them on an incredibly dangerous journey.

We embedded our Border Patrol officers with Mexican patrols to detect and raid human smuggling operations. This has been—we—thus far, there have—more than 7,000 arrests of human smugglers in the last 6 months. Seven thousand.

That's not just human smuggling at the border. We're focused on cracking down on drug smuggling, which is a serious and deadly problem—or, excuse me, a—problem. And I made a promise we would try this.

My administration has allocated record funding that added hundreds of additional Border Patrol agents and installed new cutting-edge technologies to be able to use—effectively—you know, it's like a X-ray machine, detailed to be able to look through these large containers to determine what's in the container and—at the border.

For example, since August of last year, Customs and Border Patrol have seized more than 20,000 pounds of deadly fentanyl. That's enough to kill—kill—as many as a thousand people in this country. Twenty thousand pounds of fentanyl. It's a killer. It's a flat killer.

And next week, I'm going to travel to Mexico, where I'm going to meet with President López Obrador. We have a big agenda that ranges from the climate crisis to economic development and other issues. But one important part of that agenda is strengthening our border between our nations.

And I will visit the border myself this Sunday, in El Paso, to assess border enforcement operations, meet with the local officials and community leaders and the folks at the border sending me what they need that they don't have, and make it public what they conclude they need—they don't have—to try to convince my Republican colleagues they should do something.

And I know that migration is putting a real strain on the borders and on border communities. They can't do but—anything but that.

We're going to get these communities more support. And I want to thank all the nonprofits, the faith groups, the community leaders, and other volunteers who will make sure that vulnerable immigrants have what they need to survive, whether it's food, warm clothing, shelter, medical care right after their arrival.

These religious and civic groups represent our Nation's generosity, the best of our country. They really do. They really do. And they're a powerful rebuke to the hostility and even the hate which many people face when they arrive here legally.

So let me close with this. Our problems at the border didn't arise overnight, and they're not going to be solved overnight. It's a difficult problem.

It's clear that immigration is a political issue that extreme Republicans are always going to run on. But now they have a choice: They can keep using immigration to try to score political points, or they can help solve the problem. They can help solve the problem and come together to fix the broken system.

Before Congress adjourned for the holidays, some Democrats and Republicans, a few of them, got together—both sides, up in the Senate—and decided they were going to put together a comprehensive plan on immigration.

But the Republican leadership and other Republicans—I don't know who—exactly who did it—rebuked it and rejected it out of hand—it broke up—just like they rejected my plan 2 years ago, just like they rejected my recent request for an additional \$3.5 billion to secure and manage the border with more holding facilities, better transportation, additional funding for 2,000 new asylum officers and personnel, 100 new immigration judges to more rapidly adjudicate for people when they come here, and how much—and so much more.

Think about it. I mean, if this were something if we were—if we had to have a hundred more immigration officers to see to it that we're able to import something we needed very badly, it wouldn't take very much time to get it, would it? It'd be real—done. Or, conversely, if there were criminal gangs coming into the Nation or the—I mean—but when it comes to immigration, it seems like it's a better issue—a better issue for them than trying to solve it.

Look, we need more resources to secure the border. Yet again, extreme Republicans have said no. Many Republicans agree we should do something. But it's time to stop listening to their inflammatory talk, and it's time to look at their record.

As I've always done when I sit down—I'll sit down with anyone who, in good faith, wants to fix our broken immigration system. And it's hard. It's hard on the best of circumstances. But if the most extreme Republicans continue to demagogue this issue and reject solutions, I'm left with only one choice: to act on my own, do as much as I can on my own to try to change the atmosphere.

Immigration reform used to be a bipartisan issue. We can make it that way again. It's not only the right thing to do, it's economically a smart thing to do.

That's why immigration reform is supported by everyone. Think of this now. I want to remind the public: Immigration reform is supported by the American labor movement—unions. It's supported by religious leaders. It's supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

We can secure our border, fix the immigration system to be orderly, fair, safe, and humane. We can do all this while keeping lit the torch of liberty that has led generations of immigrations to America—many of our forebearers, many of yours.

We can do this by remembering who we are. You've heard me say this a million times. We're the United States of America. The idea this is beyond our capacity, I just don't buy. We can do anything if we do it together.

And you've heard me say it also, many times: God bless you all, and may God protect our troops.

I'm going to stop here. And in a few minutes—literally, a few minutes—Secretary Mayorkas and I have been coordinating—he's going to be speaking in much greater detail and will take questions at the Department of Homeland Security headquarters.

So I want to thank you for your time. And this is going to be—this is a hard one to deal with, but we have to deal with it. I mean, we—it's who we are.

Immigration

Q. Mr. President, do you believe that immigration—that migration is a human right? Activists say that it is. What's your take?

The President. Well, I think it is a human right if—to have your—if your family is being persecuted, if you're being dealt with in a way—I mean, like it was—I thought it was a human right for, you know, Jews in Germany to be able to go—to get to escape and get help where they could.

But the other side of this is, there's also—the people in this country have basic rights—that are here—basic fundamental rights to assure the people who are coming have been checked out. They're not criminals. They're not problem. They're—you know, that their background checks are real. They—I mean, look, if you think about it, there's not a whole lot of countries people would rather live in than here. No, I mean it sincerely. I think about this, and I think this is—sometimes, the team looks at me like maybe I'm out of my mind here.

But all kidding aside, if you just said, tomorrow, "All right, for the next year, you can move to any country you want without any questions," how many people do you think are going to leave the United States? And I can name any of the 140-some countries I've been to—there's more than that. I think you'd get—a lot would be willing to leave and come here. So, there—there's a rationale. There has to be an orderly process and a rationale to it.

But it is—and there's other ways we can deal with this, as I said. You may remember—no, you—I don't think you're old enough to have been doing it when I was doing it as a Senator, when I came up with a proposal to have billions of dollars of funding for the—Central America to keep people where they are. Remember, we were putting—and it was very, very precise. For example, if the country was in economic difficulty—and most of them are because of climate and other things—and we'd say: "Okay. Well, we have a—they have a problem. Well, guess what? They don't have lighting in their town squares. They can't, you know, assure the safety of people walking the streets."

Well, if their leader asked for money, we made them sign a proposal that they're going to do lighting in the town squares—what they're going to do, exactly what they're going to do. We checked it out, we put it in, and it began to work.

Or hospitals—where you have hospitals that don't function because they don't have the following. Well, one of the reasons people will stay is if you've improved the hospital. We were doing that.

And the thing that I'm so—presumptive of me to say "proud of"—but proud of the Vice President, she went beyond the United States and contributors to try to get the rest of the world to say, "Look, this makes sense."

And you know, she got commitments of 3.5, I think?

Vice President Kamala D. Harris. Two. Three point two.

The President. Three-point-two billion dollars.

And so, there's a lot to be done. And think about it. Even back in days when—it's so easy to demagogue this issue. It's so easy to demagogue it. And you hear, you know, a number of our friends, the MAGA Republicans, talking about, you know, "They don't even want me to speak in English anymore. They want me speak in dah, dah, dah. They're going to—they're going to take over my community, my"—"they." "They." Whoever "they" are at the time.

Well, you know, that's what a lot of folks went through when they got here, going all the way back to the 1800s. It's not new. It's—part of it is human nature and fear.

But there's got to be an orderly way. And I know we can make it much, much better.

The President's Travel to the Mexico-U.S. Border/Immigration Restrictions Under Title 42 of the Public Health Service Act of 1944

Q. Mr. President, why did you decide that now is finally the right time to visit the southern border? Republicans have been calling on you to do this since the beginning of your Presidency.

The President. Because the Republicans haven't been serious about this at all. Come on. They haven't been serious about this at all.

I wanted to make sure that I knew what the outcome—at least the near outcome was on title 42 before I went down. We don't have that yet, so I had to operate—I don't like title 42. But it's the law now, and I have to operate within it.

It's—my prediction is—it's not—there's nothing particularly insightful about this: Title 42 is going to go away before the end of the year, in terms of the Supreme Court, in my prediction. And then we're going to have to use title 9—title 8.

Eight, right? Am I right? Yes. Title 8. Eight, 9—[laughter].

And—which is—which we can implement what we're doing here plus some other things.

But so, I wanted to make sure there was a rational way in which we could begin to announce it, but I couldn't wait once the Supreme Court ruled that they're not going to make the final decision on title 42 for some time—you know, for another—who knows? Probably not until June—in that range, although I don't know that for a fact—to be able to lay this out.

But look, Mayorkas is waiting to impress you all, all kidding aside.

Q. How about Ukraine? How about Ukraine, sir?

Immigration

Q. Are you concerned about the effect that requiring an airline ticket could prejudice or sort of make—lean it toward wealthier migrants and—

The President. Yes.

Q. —kind of make it harder for poorer migrants?

The President. Yes. But there's also ways to get to ports of entry along the border as well.

Q. So—I'm sorry.

Q. Go ahead.

President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia/Ukraine

Q. So the ceasefire proposed by—by President Putin in Ukraine for the Orthodox Christmas on January 6, 7—have you heard about that? Do you have a reaction to whether it's—

The President. I'm reluctant to respond to anything Putin says. I found it interesting. He was ready to bomb hospitals and nurseries and churches and with the—with—on the 25th and New Year's. And, I mean, you know, I—I think he's trying to find some oxygen.

Thank you so very much.

Speaker of the House of Representatives Election Process

Q. Are you still monitoring the Speaker's race? Are you still watching the Speaker's race?

The President. I'm monitoring—I'm following it with great—how can I say it?

Vice President Harris. Attention.

The President. Attention. [Laughter]

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:54 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House.

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